EAC Meetings and Robert’s Rules of Order

“Meetings shall be conducted by Robert’s Rules of Order as interpreted by Robert’s Rules in Plain English by Doris P. Zimmerman.” (EAC Bylaws)

Why adopt Robert’s Rules?

To protect:  
(a) the right of the majority to decide  
(b) the right of the minority to be heard  
(c) the rights of individual members (Zimmerman)

During EAC meetings, we try to keep things comfortable and casual and we don’t always enforce every rule to the letter (e.g., speaking without being called on is out-of-order according to Robert but, as long as it’s respectful and collegial, we tolerate a bit of that when it happens organically during a conversation). This quote from Zimmerman is fitting:

“Always remember that informality should not equate with chaos.”

So we try to keep things comfortable and casual but we have a process that we follow so that individuals have a space to voice their opinions and so that, at the end of our work, the opinion of the majority determines our recommendations.

Who’s Robert?

Brigadier General Henry Martyn Robert (1837–1923) first published his Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies in 1876. The story is that Robert’s...

“...interest in parliamentary procedure began in 1863 when he was chosen to preside over a church meeting and, although he accepted the task, felt that he did not have the necessary knowledge of proper procedure.” (Wikipedia)

Robert’s procedures are modeled on those used in the House of Representatives but he intended them to be used for councils like ours rather than national legislatures.
The EAC’s Typical Procedures:

- We make every effort to avoid acting on an item during the first meeting that the item is discussed since that rarely allows members enough time to think about the issues and discuss them with colleagues (both in and out of the EAC) before drawing conclusions. So, whenever possible, when we are addressing a new item, we discuss it “this month” and then vote on it “next month” (or, if more months of discussion are necessary, at some future month). The only time that we’ll vote on an item the first time that it’s discussed is when there’s some sort of emergency and we simply cannot afford to wait until the next meeting – but that should be very rare.

- After we’ve discussed an item at one or more meetings (see the previous bullet), if a member proposes a motion, that motion needs to be “seconded” in order to be “on the floor.” Once a motion is seconded, the Chair will call for discussion on the motion. In order to “protect the individual” and “protect the minority”, anyone who wishes to discuss the motion is given time to share his/her viewpoint.

- Once everyone has had an opportunity to participate in the discussion, the Chair will “put the question to a vote” and ask “all in favor” and “all opposed” and we’ll get a result.

Some Details from Robert’s Rules:

- **Amending Motions**
  Once a motion has been seconded and discussion has begun, it may become apparent that a re-wording of the motion will result in more clarity and better represent the desired goals. In such a case, a “friendly amendment” can be adopted by consent, without objection. If there is an objection to the amendment or if it’s “hostile” (i.e., if it substantively changes the meaning of the motion), then a majority vote is required to adopt the amendment.

- **Two-Thirds Rule**
  Whenever an act takes away or limits members’ rights (e.g., ending debate or limiting discussion-time), a two-thirds vote is required.

- **Majority Rules**
  A majority means a majority of members voting (as opposed to a majority of council members or a majority of those present). So, if you abstain, you are agreeing to go along with the majority, i.e., abstentions don’t count.

- **Table a Motion**
  According to Robert, there is no such thing as “Tabling a Motion” – at least not in the sense of “killing” a motion. If a motion is under consideration, here are some ways that it can be “killed”:

  a. The person who made the motion can request that his/her motion be withdrawn. If there are no objections, the Chair can withdraw the motion, thus “killing” it.

  b. Any member can “call for the question” which requires a two-thirds vote; if successful, the motion can then be voted down, or “killed”.

  [A motion can be postponed to a later date (i.e., “tabled”) but the postponement can be no longer than the next meeting, i.e., it doesn’t allow for permanent postponement.]